Laird Hints Moves For Vietnam Accord By Secret Channels

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By HEDRICK SMITH

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WASHINGTON, March 21 —Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird indicated today that the Nixon Administration was working privately through diplomatic channels for a Vietnam settlement as well as through the Paris peace talks.

Mr. Laird, testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Disarmament Subcommittee, declined to go into details. But he told the Senators:

"I can assure you that every effort is being made not only through formal diplomatic channels, formally in the Paris peace talks, but privately as well."

Well-placed sources said that he was apparently alluding to indirect communications with the North Vietnamese through the Soviet Union, rather than secret talks in Paris with North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front, or Vietcong.

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Laird Hints at Vietnam Moves by Secret Channels

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Officials here say no substantive talks in secret have begun in Paris.

The Administration is reliably reported to have been encouraged by things the Russians have said, both here and in Paris, about possible openings toward a settlement.

But in view of the continuing enemy offensive—65 mortar attacks were launched throughout South Vietnam last night, 34 of them against American military positions, observers suggested that it would be difficult to assess these indirect discussions as more than tenuous and preliminary feelers.

Some sources said that the North Vietnamese had indirectly dropped hints about their readiness for private talks and about possible willingness to agree to mutual withdrawal of outside forces from South Vietnam, provided such a withdrawal was linked to a political settlement and was carried out in the same publicly ambiguous manner as the "understanding" last October that brought a halt to American bombing of North Vietnam on Nov. 1.

The Vietnam issue was interjected into hearings on the anti-missile defense system by Senator J. W. Fulbright, who urged the Administration not to wait too long to change the present war policy.

"Soon it will be Nixon's war and then there will be little chance to bring it to an end," Mr. Fulbright declared. "It is time to de-escalate and settle it."

Mr. Laird tried to avoid a direct confrontation with the Arkansas Democrat. If the Paris talks should not be successful, he said, "I can assure you we will have an alternative [to] the present conduct of the war."

He did not say specifically what such an alternative might be. But he hinted that he was thinking not of escalation, as Mr. Fulbright assumed, but of unilateral withdrawal of some American forces and turning over more responsibility for the fighting to the South Vietnamese.

By speeding up the modernization of the South Vietnamese Army, Mr. Laird said, "we can reduce the casualties of Americans, we can reduce the commitment of America, we can reduce the involvement of the United States."

"I have heard this before," Senator Fulbright snapped back. "It is an old broken record going back to McNamara." Robert S. McNamara, who served as Secretary of Defense in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations until early last year, was long a target for Senator Fulbright's criticism.

"You could be a great hero and Mr. Nixon a great hero if you can turn this thing around, but time is running out," Mr. Fulbright went on. "You've got to do something radical to change this war or we're going down the drain."

Mr. Laird, who voiced criticism earlier this week of the Johnson Administration for not having moved more rapidly to modernize the South Vietnamese Army, refused to specify what the future strategy would be if the Paris talks failed. But he emphasized plans to modernize the South Vietnamese Army and "reduce the involvement of the United States."

On Tuesday, Mr. Laird said that no troop reductions were possible now because of the current enemy offensive, but knowledgeable diplomatic sources interpreted this as a temporary tactic.

They reported that the Nixon Administration had come quite far with Saigon in working out arrangements for withdrawing more than 50,000 soldiers, including detailed shipping schedules. They suggested that the President would delay announcing troop withdrawals until his negotiators had had a chance to sound out the North Vietnamese in secret.

Vietnam Casualties

WASHINGTON, March 21 (AP) —The Pentagon today identified the following servicemen from the New York area as having been killed in Vietnam:

Army

FARAWELL, George T., Pfc., Linden, N. J.

HERNANDEZ, Julio Jr., Specialist 4, the Bronx.

Navy

ROMANELLI, Louis V., Hospital Corpsman, Willingboro, N. J.